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SUBJECT: Lukashenko to Help Opposition

Ref: Minsk 836

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Lukashenko recently announced he would assist the opposition in finding a venue for their convention inside Belarus. This statement came after all venues in the country already rejected the opposition's application. The 10+'s organizer, Aleksandr Bukhvostov, has been in contact with GOB officials, and believes this to be a genuine offer designed to improve Lukashenko's image abroad. Even so, 10+ plans to accept the offer. End summary.

¶2. (U) On September 8 President Aleksandr Lukashenko made the surprise announcement that he had ordered his government to assist the Belarusian opposition find a venue in Minsk to hold their congress to choose a single presidential candidate. Lukashenko reasoned, "We should not give them reasons. The nation supports the authorities and we are supposed to do our utmost to allow the opposition to implement their project within the framework of the law, and prevent them from provoking us... The Belarusian authorities are not that weak and feeble to play petty games with them... I instructed all branches of power to give the opposition congress a warm welcome, so that they could not shout from the rooftops that there is a dictatorial regime in Belarus, which suppresses them." The 10+ opposition coalition applied to over 70 venues across Belarus and was refused the use of all of them. They were therefore planning to hold their congress in Kiev.

¶3. (C) On September 9 Poloff met with Aleksandr Bukhvostov, leader of the deregistered Party of Labor and coordinator of the single candidate process for the 10+ coalition. He confirmed Lukashenko's offer. Bukhvostov said he called the deputy mayor of Minsk September 9. The deputy mayor stated he was busy planning Minsk Day celebrations, to be held September 10 and 11, but that he would help the 10+ find a suitable venue starting September 12. Bukhvostov believes this to be a genuine offer. The 10+ leadership met September 9, and decided to accept the offer as it greatly eases logistical planning for the event. Depending on availability, they hope to hold the congress in Minsk October 1 and 2. Bukhvostov speculated the GOB could still interfere in the congress, such as by charging astronomical rent for the hall or refusing to issue visas to foreign journalists, but he does not believe this likely. He

opined Lukashenko made this offer as a means to improve his international image.

Some Squabbles in 10+

¶4. (C) Bukhvostov outlined some recent problems within the 10+. He said the member parties have started arguing about how to use the coalition's limited financial resources for the campaign. Another problem area is how to divide delegate votes for the congress among NGOs. As Bukhvostov explained, a disproportionate number of NGOs are affiliated with the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) party, which other member parties feel would give the BPF too much power in choosing a single candidate. He thought these problems are surmountable, and said the 10+ leadership is forming a political council which will meet soon to formulate a clearer, more rigorous division of power and responsibility in the coalition.

Local Delegate Conventions Nearly Complete

¶5. (C) The coalition has just 28 of the 147 local delegate conventions left to hold. Each of these local conventions selects two delegates to send to the single candidate congress. The remaining 28 are located in some of the toughest places in Belarus for organizing, such as the Chernobyl affected regions (where the Belarusian population was initially evacuated, and has since been replaced by immigrants, largely from Central Asia), and the rural Braslov Lakes region. Opposition parties have the least representation in these areas. The 10+ hopes to complete these 28 conventions by September 17.

Other Coalition News

¶6. (C) According to Bukhvostov, Aleksandr Kozulin's Belarusian Social Democratic Party Hramada (BSDPH) recently approached the 10+ and asked to participate in the October congress to choose a single candidate. The BSDPH has been participating in some of the local conventions, and has a number of delegates who will attend the congress, but this is the first time the party's central apparatus has expressed a willingness to participate.

¶7. (C) On September 7 three political figures that have remained outside the 10+ process, former Agriculture Minister Vasily Leonov, former MP Valery Frolov, and former speaker of parliament Aleksandr Voytovich announced the establishment of a new opposition coalition aimed at uniting non-party members. The three claimed they decided to form this coalition because the 10+ was not interested in having as members individuals without party affiliation. Bukhvostov claimed this coalition has no prospects, as all three are aging politicians. While admitting Leonov has some supporters, Bukhvostov stated this coalition is heavy on leaders, but light on staff.

¶8. (C) Comment: Lukashenko's offer of a venue in Minsk came as a surprise. However, it appears to be genuine. Some in the opposition have remarked this will allow the GOB to keep closer tabs on the event and are therefore against holding it in Belarus. While the GOB will no doubt use a Minsk congress for maximum propaganda value, the same could be said of a congress held abroad, where the GOB could easily claim the opposition was under foreign control. Faced with this, the greatly eased logistics, lesser cost, and vastly improved optics of having the event in Minsk will hopefully offset any difficulties caused by the BKGB.